

Eric Steelberg

reflects on *Juno*, *Bandslam* and *500 Days of Summer*



Juno was the sleeper hit of last year. The independent feature earned an Oscar® for screenwriter Diablo Cody, along with three other nominations, including Best Picture, as well as three Independent Spirit Awards. The film was produced in about six weeks for less than \$8 million. The cinematographer was Eric Steelberg, whose two most recent credits are *500 Days of Summer* and *Bandslam*.

500 Days of Summer

500 Days of Summer is a comedy with dramatic elements that tracks the relationship between a guy and a girl named Summer (played by Zooey Deschanel) who says that she “doesn’t want to be anybody’s anything.” The director, Marc Webb, is best known for stylish music videos.

“During pre-production, I was very impressed with Marc’s knowledge of cinema history,” says Steelberg. “We watched many films together, but instead of saying ‘Doesn’t that look amazing,’ he’d say, ‘Look how well the lighting works for this character at this moment in the story.’”

“Feature film cinematography is all about responsibility to the story and setting the appropriate tone, while being as unobtrusive and transparent as possible,” he says. “When you make a scene that is effective and strong, a kind of beauty is born out of it. Marc said that film had the right texture and emotional tone for this story. After I read the script, I was in perfect agreement.”

Webb and Steelberg chose to

produce *500 Days of Summer* in Super 35 film format in a widescreen 2.4:1 aspect ratio, combined with a digital intermediate post-production path.

“Much of the film plays out with these two characters in the frame,” he explains. “The widescreen aspect ratio allowed us to come in a little tighter on the closer shots, to emphasize their togetherness. We also used it to isolate characters in wide shots when their relationship isn’t working. In addition, we knew that we’d be shooting entirely on practical locations, and the 2.40 frame gave me a little more room to hide lights overhead and dolly track below.”

Scenes in the male character’s apartment were shot at a loft in downtown Los Angeles converted for the purpose. Because it was on the fourth floor, it was impossible to bring artificial light in through the windows. Similarly, Summer’s apartment was created in a penthouse location at the top of a ten-storey building.

“We had to plan carefully around the time of day and direction of

the sun in those situations,” says Steelberg. “Cinematography is all about control. At the same time, there are happy accidents or creative workarounds that those conditions can force you into. But it’s a constant battle for consistency and control.”

“When you’re shooting on location and you don’t have as much control as you’d like, there’s nothing better than film,” he says. “It allows you more flexibility. If, during the course of a shot, the clouds come in and out, and the light varies by a third or even half a stop, you’re still going to be fine.”

In daylight situations, Steelberg used KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 film. In tungsten light, he used KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film. For some natural light night exteriors on city streets he used the new KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 film.

“We couldn’t afford to light streets, and we had scenes of the girl riding a bicycle through downtown at night,” he says. “I had some ARRI Master Prime lenses for those shots, and I shot at a 1.3 stop

with 5219 pushed a stop, rated at E.I. 800. I wasn’t metering it, but I’ve seen tests, and I know there’s going to be more detail there than I could see through the viewfinder.”

The cameras were a Panavision XL and Platinum with a full set of Primo prime lenses. Steelberg mainly used lenses in the 24-35mm range, including a new 30mm. Close-ups were often done with a 75mm. Camera movement was almost always accomplished with a dolly.

Steelberg made extensive use of two new lighting tools from Soft Sun, the 3.5K Par and the 3.6K cylinder light. “They are completely silent and fully dimmable with minimal color temperature shift,” he says. “They allow hot re-strikes with clean, soft, direct light. These fixtures were extremely convenient and useful to me.”

The production design rendered the male character’s world in drab, earthy tones, with the color blue reserved for Summer’s world. Steelberg used a 1/8 Warm Pro-Mist filter in some indoor situations to add subtle warmth to



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Deschanel's skin tone. "She has blue wallpaper in her room, she wears blue dresses and has blue eyes," says Steelberg. "When she enters his world, she's like a breath of fresh air."

Steelberg shot some scenes in 16mm format to humorously echo classic French New Wave films. He made extensive tests before choosing EASTMAN DOUBLE-X 7222 black-and-white film. "I warned the director that there would be visible grain, and he loved it," says Steelberg.

Bandslam

Bandslam was shot in Austin, Texas, in 38 days with a budget of roughly \$20 million. The story

follows a kid who moves to town and puts together a band and grooms them to win the local battle of the bands. The director was Todd Graff. Once again, the format was Super 35mm with a 2.4:1 aspect ratio.

"It's a sweet movie," says Steelberg. "We chose the widescreen aspect ratio because we had to fit all these band members into the frame. We decided to use the 5218 and 5205 emulsions. The technology is in the film stock.

"For these last three films I've done, film was definitely the right choice," he says. "You do your tests and decide what's right for the project from an aesthetic and story standpoint. Even though there's comedy in these films, I light for the dramatic

moments. That way, when the funny moments happen, it's unexpected. That contrast makes it that much funnier. The comedy lines in *Juno* come out of left field. If the comedy works, it works, and putting a big light over the camera isn't going to change that."

Juno

In the case of *Juno*, Steelberg did thorough tests and decided to shoot almost the entire movie on KODAK VISION2 EXPRESSION 500T 5229 film stock. The exceptions were at the very beginning and the very end, which depicted different seasons.

"The Expression stock and how it rendered the colors, skin tones and blacks, taking the edge off everything, was perfect for that movie, and one reason for its success," he says. "I was a little nervous about the decision but I trusted my instincts. I think it was effective cinematography, and being effective is more important than being beautiful. The technical side of cinematography is more accessible than ever today but the instinctual aspect still has to be learned, and I don't think that can be diminished. Your aesthetic and your instinct - that's what you're paid for as a cinematographer."